

ENVS 191 Environmental Practicum SPRING 2018

Environment & Communications Field Research Project

Jackie Nutter

University of Vermont, Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources

Nature Culture Justice Focus

Green Schools Alliance Intern Supervisor

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A Qualitative Exploration of the Environmental Communications Field

Introduction

“Communications” is a broad umbrella term for a wide variety of occupations interested in tailoring information, so a specific audience can receive the right message. In relation to the environment, this message may be that the natural environment is of great importance to the future of our earth and all earthlings. The Communications-Major website (2018) says that communications is applied to journalism, business, public relations, marketing, news broadcasting, education, public administration—and more. As well, *The Huffington Post (2014)* says that, “The discipline is extremely well positioned as the digital economy, social networking and the move toward media creation rises to prominence.” The following project dives into three occupations connected to communications and the environment: 1) environmental journalism, 2) environmental education, and 3) online development, communications and community engagement. The goal of this research is to understand how these fields of work are all connected to the communications field, how these jobs have uniquely affected the lives of their occupants and how to best succeed in communications.

Literature Review

Joshua Brown is a freelance environmental journalist, Senior Science Writer and lecturer at the University of Vermont(UVM). An environmental journalist reports on news about the environment. BioZine says that, “The stories might describe new scientific discoveries or be reports on legal, social, or political issues that have an impact on the environment. Environmental journalists may have full-time jobs in print, television, online, or radio media, or they can freelance.” In the past Josh has written for larger publications such as the the Boston Globe, and smaller local journals in the Burlington area where he now lives with his wife. Leah Mital is an environmental educator, who is the director of the residential life Sustainability Program at UVM. She previously helped to develop the Vermont Commons School with her former husband and she now lives in South Burlington with her two kids and dog Ollie. Scarlet Current is the online development, communications and community engagement director of the

Green Schools Alliance. She previously was an event producer, did public relations and business development and specialized in internet enabled technologies/mass communication in her studies.

Methods

In the Spring of 2018, three hour-long interviews were conducted with Josh, Scarlet and Leah to answer the questions of: what are the issues, big ideas, work conditions, lifestyles, career paths, networking and communication involved within their field of work? Because Josh and Leah are from the local area, a face-to-face interview was conducted. Since Scarlet lives in Iowa, there was a phone call interview. Once these interviews were recorded, they were translated into a document to create a written conclusion.

Results

1. Issues and Big Ideas

Issues of the environment have complex and controversial connotations, especially when reading about it in the *New Yorker*, then hearing about how it is “fake news” the next day, it can be hard to understand what was really meant behind the words of our media. Scarlet Current is the Director of Online Development, Communications and Community Engagement for the Green Schools Alliance, an online network that empower students, supports schools and districts, and helps build a community surrounded around a common goal of environmental care. “Right now because of the political climate of the nation,” she says, “there is push back in thinking that it is not true. Climate change is such a supercharged word that there is no meaning to it anymore.” In Al Gore’s book *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), he asks his readers, “Is it possible that we should prepare for other threats in addition to terrorists?” (p. 209). Basically, because terrorists seem like such an imminent threat people can see, should society ignore climate change? Having a receptive audience is difficult when people increasingly hear different stories and can’t see the effects. “We have to meet them [our audience] where they are,” Scarlet says,

“understanding where they are coming from and learn their language, for them to understand us. We have to twist controversial terms in a way that gets people listening.”

Leah had similar issues of wording. The program she works for is called “sustainability”. It has grown to represent “green” “environment” and “new initiatives” where at the same time it has been a movement that has mostly been centered around a privileged class. “It has been a movement that if you have all of your needs met, or more than met, you can now focus on trying to use less, have technologies and better food [both often more expensive]. And I totally fall victim to that.” Because of the connotation that we have with sustainability, we often just focus on the little things, the everyday practices, which Leah says, “really just scratches at the surface. The word sustainability has often not included so many historical practices and ingenuity from all over the world where people don’t often have the resources to be able to consume to begin with. Or the fair access of resources or the fair access to political voice.” So when people first come to the program, they may only see the program as the stereotype that “sustainability embodies. “We don’t just want to fall to those standard definitions of sustainability. We have a lot of people who come in excited about recycling and composting, but we also want to be able to work with students and our entire community to see beyond that.”

2. Work Conditions and Lifestyles

Because this field is so diverse in the types of jobs available, conditions and lifestyles can vary. While conducting all of these interviews, it was clear that family was a strong factor in the way that they worked in the communications field. Scarlet got her PR job, pushing for full time right away to help contribute to her infant daughter’s wellbeing. Josh Brown, now a Senior Science Writer at UVM, originally followed his wife to Maine after school, which is where he spent a lot of time writing, living without a job until he got his masters degree. Leah Mital, the director of the Sustainability Program at UVM, decided to step back from her job at the Vermont Commons School and go back to school after she had two kids and values that now, working at UVM, she can bring her kids with her and said they love exploring the college environment!

CNN (2008) estimates that the starting salary for a communications major is \$30,921. Josh said some people, “want a comfortable, middle class life and there are paths in that

direction. But the people I most admire, don't think of themselves as journalists by career. They are passionate storytellers who want to change the world and they take great financial, personal and emotional risks, to be in the places that they can tell great stories- and they get paid shit for it." Comparatively with Scarlet's position, "There are always funding issues. I just accepted that I would rather be afraid of not living in a way that fulfills my highest truth, then running out of money." After being a PR and event planner, she now works 99% at home. "The positive is that you can have a good work-life balance that way, but the negative is that it is hard to do because if you are like me, you are wired to work until you drop dead."

3. Career Paths

Leah first was interested in environmental education after family trips in the mountains. "Outdoor instruction really clicked with me because I loved being outside, working with groups outside and I loved just seeing how group dynamics would emerge on a typical five day backpacking trip in the mountains. Things that would make someone more popular at school just had no bearings in the mountains. Your clothing, wither or not you were the star basketball player, none of that mattered. Seeing a group utilizing all the authentic gifts that each person had and have that be a part of the collective identity. It was amazing being a part of that so I tried to make this a part of every job I did." Leah had this natural passion that drove her to being an environmental educator.

In order to develop a communication career, networking is a necessary skill. "Every job I have had in the past 15 years has been a direct result of me reaching out to my networks and saying 'this is what I am looking for, what do you guys think?' and having them connect me to someone or me building a community from the ground up with them." Josh had a similar emphasis on networking. "After my job with *Wild Earth* ended, I began reaching out to editors which I think was the key to succeeding there. The connections aren't just, 'lets have coffee some time', but 'I read this in your competitor's publication, so what about a story that takes a different tactic?' " Josh said it was up to the journalist if they would like to go to journalism school. He mentioned Syracuse's one-year Masters program called Magazine, Newspaper & Online Journalism. As well as learning new skills, the Syracuse University website (2018) says

that there are resources to connect with leading magazine writers and editors. It's estimated that the program would cost about \$71,000 with all expenses (no scholarship, grant or instate tuition). Josh said that Journalism school can be a good way to connect to the industry because you have the "opportunity to visit newsrooms and studios, talk to reporters, and get to know them." But writers that Josh knows who have gone to journalism school, say they didn't really learn anything.

For Scarlet on the other hand, "one of my biggest regrets was not finishing college right out of high school. With my first job in PR, a degree wasn't necessary. But with my current position, I sent an email directly to my boss, otherwise I would have never been looked at because a bachelor's degree preferred and I didn't have that. Obviously you want to do something that is meaningful to you in college, but don't get choice paralysis and saying, 'I don't know what it is, so I don't want to waste my time.'" Although getting a degree might not be driven by interest, it's a prerequisite for life that can be built upon after more experience is gained.

4. Networking and Communication

For Josh, most of his information comes from talking with other people. "Specific to being a successful journalist is being able to talk about stories and interacting with people in the industry who are in the business of buying and selling stories." Scarlet said that "It's as easy as googling it. The biggest 'pulses' or trends for me on the communications side are the Social Media trends because they change so quickly." She mentioned many networks to get involved in such as: 1) *Philanthropy Times*, which looked at different trends in fundraising, 2) *Digital Marketer*, a hub for education and trends in interactive marketing, 3) *Climate Education Alliance*, which talks about what is happening in the environmental education space, 4) *Community Managers Hub (CMX)* which talks about different community managers, best practices, resources to build engagement, and 5) *North American Associates for Environmental Education (NAAEE)* which is a great example of cultivating impact and mobilizing support for a cause.

For Leah, communicating with her team is key to staying productive and keeping in mind the larger goals of the program. "Every year it is like: what do we want to make of it? What is

the community you want to live in? How do we make that happen? Our definition of sustainability is a lot of words, we like it, we talk about it a lot, but we don't have it down to just a few phrases. We are looking to tie in some bottom line and visions that breaks down our definition of sustainability, helping to bring the term down on the ground for students. ” She often takes her team on long hikes to discuss the program and reflect on their work.

Discussion

I knew I would resonate with my interviewees because I want to be a truthful storyteller that makes a difference. This is first and foremost why I see myself in the communication field. When I first was interested in the environment, I read a book called *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (1992) by Daniel Quinn. One quote that has stuck with me since reading that book was: “If you alone found out what the lie was, then you're probably right—it would make no great difference. But if you ALL found out what the lie was, it might conceivably make a very great difference indeed,” (p.28). What I think that I gained the most from hearing from my interviewees, is we all have our own perspective and story to tell, and if you want to be in the communications field, you have to be passionate about telling your story.

What was interesting was how different Leah's perspective was with Scarlet and Josh. She works in a smaller environment, communicating to a smaller group of people and she touched upon more of the social justice side of her work that I didn't see as much in Josh or Scarlet's positions. I didn't expect to find that jobs are constraining in their own way. Scarlet is constantly online, but I like that she isn't constrained by a 9:00am to 5:00pm job). Within journalism, although I would talk to different people and possibly travel to new places, I didn't connect with this journalistic system because I couldn't see myself doing fast-paced writing for the rest of my life. With Leah, the scope of the people she is communicating with is limited. Although the Sustainability Program is expanding to 1,000 students next year, I am not quite sure if that is a big enough impact for me. I could almost see myself as being the bridge that expands this Sustainability Program across campuses. As well, Leah mentioned briefly that she wished she more had the time to talk face to face and get to know all of her students.

Conclusions

Through this project, it was clear to me that one of the biggest issues within the communications field is the way that we communicate. Using specific words can create different outcomes and someone working in this field needs to be aware of this and think strategically on how they want to send a message so that it can produce the best results. Work conditions and lifestyles within this field tended to vary: you could be traveling constantly, working the typical 9am to 5pm day, or you could be working from home. Each person had their own path to getting where they are today, but the most valuable things in bringing them down their path was the relationships they built and the passion to drive them. Face-to-face communication as well as seeking online networks were the most productive modes to keep themselves updated and thriving in their field .

The biggest limitation to this project is the fact that these three interviewees cannot speak for the entire communications field. If I were to go further in this project, I would interview more people because this would continue to expand my perspective of the communications field and learn from the experience of others. Although I have come to these conclusions, I still am not sure what skill set I will focus on after college to start pursuing a career: will that be more writing? a communications degree? or will I apply more of my hobbies to my profession, such as interviewing or filming? This is where diving into more experience will aid me in the years to come, which may cause me to later change how I plan my education. Overall, I saw that maybe I will find out my purpose in life sooner and decide graduate school is right for me after college, or maybe I will realize it ten years down the line. Either way, I don't have to force a cultivation of knowledge and understanding of the world around me— I just have to keep on building new experiences as I have seen evident in the amazing people I had the chance to interview.

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